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Abstract

The Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative started in 2012 and has developed into an innovative project combining various stakeholders. Over the last 4 years, it has seen 20 Western Sydney University (WSU) students successfully complete a 3-month field education placement in either Fiji, Samoa or Tonga; in an array of agencies working with women, children, families and adult offenders. Apart from mobilising students to undertake international learning opportunities, the initiative strives to support the development of social work education, teaching and learning outcomes with the University of the South Pacific (USP); who has an active MOU arrangement with Western Sydney University. Such an approach is embedded within the desire to also create a more nuanced, sustainable perspective on the professional role of Social Work across Oceania.

Keywords

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Introduction

The Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative started in 2012 and has developed into an innovative project combining various stakeholders. Over the last 4 years, it has seen 20 Western Sydney University (WSU) students successfully complete a 3-month field education placement in either Fiji, Samoa or Tonga; in an array of agencies working with women, children, families and adult offenders. Apart from mobilising students to undertake international learning opportunities, the initiative strives to support the development of social work education, teaching and learning outcomes with the University of the South Pacific (USP); who has an active MOU arrangement with Western Sydney University. Such an approach is embedded within the desire to also create a more nuanced, sustainable perspective on the professional role of Social Work across Oceania.



Therefore, the PIFE initiative operates with the following three key components; 1) to provide opportunities for global mobility through international social work placements, 2) enhance social work education practices and approaches in the Pacific, 3) Develop professional reputation and reach of social work in the region.

This feature article will further explore the various

perspective of the student learning process, and the development of new skills and perspectives when undertaking a field education placement in the Pacific. Additionally, the article will further highlight the importance of student preparedness, and the importance of working collaboratively with local agencies to meaningfully obtain positive outcomes for students and the wider community.

Collaborating across the Pacific

Learning opportunities for students

International learning opportunities for students is a growing goal for Australian Universities (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2013; Fairchild, 2006). With the creation of the OS HELP loans in the last 5 years from the federal governments, students have the opportunity to access an additional student loan of either \$3000 AUD or \$6400 AUD (Australian Government, 2016). Applications for funds are respectively endorsed by the University; on the premise that their overseas learning opportunity is connected to specific learning outcomes within their coursework.

A formal Expression of Interest (EOI) process occurs in November each year, opened to all undergraduate Social Work students at Western Sydney University eligible to undertake their second field education placement in the following year. After completing this online process, applications are vetted, with recommendations for individuals to progress to the panel interview overseen by Social Work academics.

If deemed suitable, the applicant is offered a position in the student team, and then matched to a particular country and agency within.

Models of student participation in international field work education vary, with general reference to four approaches overviewed by Pettys, Panos, Cox, & Oosthuysen (2005); 1) independent / one time placement in a specific geographical location; 2) Neighbouring country model, where students were resident or citizens; 3) On-site model where adjunct faculty member in host country could stay as on-site field educator; 4) Exchange / reciprocal model, in which the home university sent faculty members to the placement site at their own expense (p 282 – 287). The Pacific Island Field Education (PIFE) model transcends key elements of approaches 2 – 4, with a view to promote sustainability through the access of OS HELP for individual students, alongside a commitment to expand across other Pacific Island states in the coming years. Apart from the three Pacific Countries Western Sydney University is currently sending student

to, we aspire to collaborate with agencies in Vanuatu from 2017, and then the Cook Islands in 2018. This is made possible through the active partnership with the University of the South Pacific, and the location of campuses on each of these Island locations.

Enhancing educational outcomes in Social work teaching and learning

Another important element of successful field education in countries across the Pacific, is an institutional commitment to decolonize social work perspectives (Fox, 2010; Mafileo & Vakalahi, 2016), that traditionally saw Western countries going into developing states to provide support and assistance. Despite altruistic tendencies to help with various social needs, this approach can perpetuate a paternalistic, and dependency on foreign knowledges and practice; rather than integrating local and indigenous knowledges.

The Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) model was designed to assist in a collaborative way, to forge a strong working relationship between two universities committed to good practice in social work teaching and learning. As the University of the South Pacific pioneered the formal offering of a Social Work degree across the region, they continue to evaluate and monitor curriculum that will assist in contemporary society across the Pacific. This includes adapting content that emanates UN conventions, international interventions and agreements (Deeming & Gubhaju, 2014; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2011), alongside localised socio-political perspectives evident in each Island state. Over the last four years, Western Sydney University has contributed to this development through social work seminars; offered to staff, students and broader community, provided

feedback on curriculum content, and assisted in the goal for international accreditation.

In addition to this approach, Western Sydney University students are generally paired with the University of the South Pacific students in local agencies. A reciprocal learning exchange occurs within this space, enabling WSU students to develop a greater insight into local & indigenous perspectives whilst supporting USP to enhance their evolving knowledge of social work in a glocal context.

Development of local services and organisations

Supporting the development of how social work is professionally applied through practice, policy and research is another key feature of the PIFE model. This has involved working closely with local agencies in each Island state to create a clearer understanding of the role of social work as a viable profession, and supporting its adaptation into organisational outputs. That is, students from both Universities are supporting the creation of programs that reflect social work principles, in turn enhancing models of service delivery and provision within each respective agency. For example, for students undertaking a placement in Samoa, they have pioneered the development of welfare programs for inmates within their Correctional facilities. This includes the integration of perspectives like strength based, solution focussed and narrative perspectives that strive to promote an anti-oppressive approach. However, the implementation of such social work discourse is still in the context of Pacific perspectives, and the desire to make sure it is responding to local and indigenous communities.

Feedback provided by students in PIFE 2016

Collection of information from students

To support this article for Social Dialogue, the eight Western Sydney University students undertaking placement in the Pacific from July – October 2016 were invited to provide feedback on the role of social work in the Pacific, whilst reflecting on their contribution to the development of social work education and professionalism in the region. All students agreed to be involved, and provided their feedback via video, recorded in their respective Islands during their mid placement visit with the author. Three questions were asked; 1) How is Pacific social work practiced, 2) How can you contribute to its development in the region, 3) How can you implement what you've learnt so far back home. To honour our commitment to Indigenous methodologies, the key findings presented below are given in quotation form, enabling participants to directly shape the outcomes of such perspective

without the overt alteration or misinterpretation of each contribution. A response from each of the eight students has been given for each question, with their initials provided at the end of each quote.

1) How is Pacific social work practiced?

Students saw social work being practiced to include a more shared approach in the Pacific, with workers working together to support each other, and clients in the agency:

"It's collective, back home in Australia, Social workers would be 'this is my own case', but here in Fiji everyone works together, which can be helpful" [JR]

The importance of including a faith element was also evident, noting the churches role in facilitating not just the physical and social needs, but also a connection with a higher purpose:

"Pacific social work includes spirituality" [KM]

Students also highlighted the way in which social work is still emerging as a recognised profession, with various approaches and principles being adopted and adapted to current service models:

"There are elements of Social work practice - from basic interviewing to the care factor and empathy and understanding" [SE]

"Through our work with FACSWS [Fiji Association of Community and Social Workers] and our agencies it is evident that people are pushing for it to be a profession and not just doing nice things for people who need it. They are starting to realise that it is a necessary profession and it's also something that people need to know as it can be quite dangerous for people who are not equipped to deal with situations that are of a high level" [SM]

"Once we explain it, they really do understand. Some may think that it's like a counselling degree but when we try and speak to them and say what it involves they understand and seem really happy about it, and want us here, and want our input on everything" [EW]

"I've meet a lot of Tongans who ask 'what is social work?' as they think its counselling or they think it's to do with nursing, but it's not, it's totally different, so it's hard. We need it!" [JW]

However, in a Pacific cultural context, our social work students also saw the importance to evolve social work education and practice through a Pacific lens:

"I think the understanding of how we can best utilise the culture here to enhance the outcomes of social work is being recognised and starting to really take shape and beginning to really grow... and if you match the culture with the social work initiative, there is potential for really great outcomes; it's definitely there" [SL]

"...the culture here in Samoa is so strong and it is embedded from birth, and so they carry it around in everything that they do. It is underpinned by culture first, and being able to relate social work methods, social work messages through its community values and methods [is important]." [CJ]

Like any profession, it is important for social work in the Pacific to be dynamic, and to challenge the risk of becoming static, which may occur when practitioners are not committed to working with client groups to meet the ever changing, and complex nature of social and welfare needs.

2) How can you contribute to its development in the region?

Skills development for local workers was an important focus in creating professional approaches across the Pacific, specifically in the development and implementation of strategies that best suit client self-determination and empowerment. This included drawing from the client's worldview, and their ability to contribute to outcomes:

"...to focus on the client strengths instead of looking at the problem and looking at how good the child is going even in the Juvenile Justice centre" [JR]

"It would be helpful if they could acquire more knowledge through training. Good if we could develop and implement more training programs for women to look at what is causing the disadvantage in the particular family." [KM]

"Working together in collaboration with the people to be able to create a framework or guidelines or organisational structures to hopefully help develop the social work profession" [SE]



An acknowledgement of current workers utilising social work skills, despite not previously labelling it in that manner was evident:

"It's been really cool to see them realise 'Oh my gosh! I actually am doing motivational interviewing' But just refining it a little bit to be more effective; so I've really enjoyed being able to teach as well as learn and I think you can learn from teaching... I've had to rethink a theory that I think I know from the back of my hand but to explain to someone in a different culture, you need to actually put it into their context. I really enjoy doing that and just being an advocate for the importance of social work" [SM]

Students also expressed a sense of purpose in being able to assist in a positive manner; now and possibly in the future:

"I think that I'm already contributing by just being here and kind of pioneering the idea of social work in Tonga and I'm happy that I got to do this opportunity and now students can come here years on, and it will grow from there" [EW]

"I've meet a lot of people who ask what social work is; and it's kind of help me to redefine what social work is in this context" [JW]

"...our contribution in our work context has largely been through our knowledge from over the last four years of studying social work and educating our colleagues and informing our programs and practices" [SL]

"There is a big Pacific culture in Australia, a big population. So being able to learn on a really deep level about the culture and understanding how to work effectively with Pacific people is invaluable" [CJ]

3) How can you implement what you've learnt so far back home?

Students were greatly mindful of the need to not just develop skills on placement for the betterment of the agencies and client groups in the Pacific, but also to apply what has been learnt from this unique experience back in Australia:

"...being more mindful of dealing with people from different cultures and being able to communicate in different ways and a better understanding as to why people may do things differently" [JR]

One student, who comes from a Fijian heritage herself, continued to see the importance of empowering Pacific women to be proactively involved in the process of social change and justice:

"...women need to be included in decision-making not only in family but also to further their education. Education could be the best approach women can take to help them look after themselves mentally, physically and psychologically and also boost their confidence to have greater self-esteem to achieve their goals" [KM]

Another student has developed a greater appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of identity, and the role of traditional culture and values:

"...more self-aware of certain policies and procedures or even to become more aware around culture, whether it be spirituality, or sport, or tribal culture, these are the most important and they contribute to someone's identity" [SE]

Whereas this student saw the importance of reimagining the way in which people outside of the Pacific see the region; beyond the idealistic tropical paradise:

"Having this conversation with people is important as people think this is more of a holiday destination rather than seeing needs that are required to be met." [SM]

Students also valued the way in which their participation in the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative has transformed their own understanding of identity and the role of culture; changing their ability to engage as professional practitioners:

"I'm going to be able to work very independently now with other cultures and with people that have different views and because I was here, and was living in a culture where my views were different in every single way, I've learnt to be accepting of that and how to work with it, and understand that my way is not the only way and I'm happy I learnt that and it's definitely going to help me when I go back." [EW]

"I think I'll be more mindful about the way I act in the workspace...and just have a greater understand that will be shown through my actions." [JW]

"My understanding of culture and its role in how it shapes people's interactions with the world has grown exponentially... Respecting culture and certainly not underestimating its potential to create positive change has grown" [SL]

"...being able to not change the message of social work, but changing the way in which it is presented... working with people on their level; taking the extra time to look at someone from a cultural point of view and what that means for their identity, what that means for the situation that they're in, [and] being able to do that would be invaluable to my career and to impacting people on a personal level." [CJ]

Concluding thoughts

Social work education has a promising future in the Pacific. I believe this is due to the ongoing enthusiasm and passion shared by Pacific people striving to practice a professional approach in the various agencies and government organisations in the region. Having a strong commitment to social work practice, policies and research that is embedded with local and indigenous perspective is vitally important, as this can promote an engaging, effective and sustainable outcome for individuals, families and wider community. We continue to look forward to assisting through the Pacific Islands Field Education initiative, and will maintain a commitment to critically reflect and review aspects of the model as it is implemented across the region.

For updates on the ongoing implementation of the PIFE program, please visit and like our very active Facebook page: www.facebook.com/PIFieldEducation 

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